

PROTECTING YOUR COMPUTER

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The title of this article will be misinterpreted by many, as they will think only about viruses and the like. But there's a lot more to protection than an anti-virus program, and the like. Several of the elements that one has to consider in protecting things have been covered in the past, but this topic bears repeating, and elaboration.

I have not put in many URL's for most of the products I've suggested. For long URL's, they often get mistyped when copying from a printed page. The simplest approach is to use Google for a search, and then click on the proper resulting link from the search.

Here are some of things that make protecting your computer an important task -

VIRUSES

A good anti-virus program is a necessity. In my view, the best one around is Grisoft's AVG anti-virus software. They offer free and paid versions. While I feel that the free version offers just about all anyone needs, I have the paid version on two of my machines. The goal is to keep companies like Grisoft operating in business profitably, so I can avoid Symantec's products.

FIREWALLS

Various attacks which are not really viruses are out there in large numbers. They can attack and "infect" your machine, but they won't necessarily be discovered by an anti-virus program. A good firewall can help here. And Windows Defender, which is MS software, is available in XP: SP2, and Windows Vista Zone Alarm (free or paid) is also such a firewall program.

GENERAL

Many malware programs actually get installed unknowingly by the user, during the course of installing a "great" free program that someone has recommended, or something similar. An executable runs along with the software install that can do a host of bad things. It can use your machine as a source of sending out "bad stuff" to others, such as your complete mailing list. It can even work at stealing your identity. Two programs to consider to help block such attacks are Spyware Doctor, and WinPatrol.

LIGHTNING

A lightning strike can wipe out a computer. Most lightning storms do not produce a direct hit on your home area, and can be reasonably protected against. If you were to suffer a direct strike, it's virtually impossible to avoid damage. All you can do is try to minimize the damage. Here are some of things to do to protect against lightning.

Remember - none of the things presented below can guarantee no damage. They can do a good job at minimizing it. And most surge protectors, UPS units, and the like come with a free good-sized policy to cover lightning damages, assuming they were connected to the protector. How good these policies are, and how easy they are to collect will vary from vendor to vendor. Here are several suggestions to consider for lightning protection -

1. Have a lightning rod system installed on the roof of your house.
2. Have a surge protector installed by FPL on your service entrance box. There is no charge for the install, but there is a monthly charge added to your bill. The current rate from FPL is \$8.95

monthly.

3. FPL also offers lightning insurance. Most homeowners' policies have a deductible for any claims - mine is \$2500. FPL offers insurance to cover these deductibles, at a current cost of \$1.25 per month, per \$500 of insurance.
4. Use a quality UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply) to feed all of your computer equipment. This will do a reasonable job of blocking large line voltage surges from damaging your hardware. And, it will also keep things running when the FPL power "blinks" or fails. UPS units are not designed to use for lengthy times of working at your computer. They keep the system running so you can save your work, finish anything in progress, and shut down on an orderly basis.

Also, consider getting a large enough UPS (or a separate unit) to cover other expensive or necessary electronics that you want to keep running in times of short power outages.

5. Use a quality surge protector for things like TV sets, audio equipment, and the like. I have most everything which contains sensitive electronic circuitry in my house, connected via a surge protector.

OTHERS USING YOUR COMPUTER

No matter how careful you are in protecting your computer, the care will be to no avail, if others use your computer, and are careless, or lack the capability to know how to work safely. If you have grandchildren who want to install games they got from a friend at school, or surf the Internet and end possibly up on dangerous sites, your machine could be put at risk. How you handle this is a subject only you can decide.

And, email and other items can often contain dangerous elements capable of total electronic destruction of a computer.

A computer and its associated hardware can be seriously damaged via heat and mechanical impacts. I've seen cases where someone draped a jacket over the computer case, blocking the airflow, and causing the machine to overheat, and shut down. Often, this shut down is a self-protective mechanism, and the computer can be restarted after it cools down. But permanent damage can result.

And, I've seen cases where kids were horsing around by a tower computer case, where the CD tray was out, got hit, and just snapped off.

INTERNET ATTACKS

When a computer is on, connected to the Internet, and unattended, it is potentially subject to attacks by many of the electronic terrorists who are out there. I continually preach that users, especially those who have broadband connections, which are always on, should take steps to "break" their Internet connection when they are not working on the Internet.

There are several ways to do this. If you are connected via a Cat 5 network cable, try www.cyberguys.com and search for their part number 105 0050. This and a short length of Cat 5 cable will allow you to switch the network connection on and off. Total cost - about \$10.

If you are using one of the current Motorola cable modems, it probably has a standby switch on it. Just push that, and the standby light will come on, disconnecting you from the Internet.

If you have a computer which is running on a wi-fi connection, there are several ways to close that connection. Some laptops have a switch on the side of the case that you can slide to “off”. For a desktop or laptop, there probably is an icon in the taskbar which you can click on, and bring up a window to disable the connection. Or right-clicking on that icon may offer the option to disable the connection. If you are unsure about any of this, get a friend/relative or someone to assist you.

CLEANING PEOPLE

If there are any outsiders in your house to do cleaning or similar services, give them strict instructions about staying away from things like LCD displays on laptops, and any LCD monitor screens. I’ve seen where they want to do a good job, and spray glass cleaner on them, or take an old rag to dust them off or wipe them down. This can really mess up things.

AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST - USE ACRONIS TRUE IMAGE

I’ve touted this program in the past, and I want to do so again. This is the best program you will find to backup anything and everything on your computer. I have friends who say that they don’t have to do this, as there’s nothing on their computer that they care about. If you are one of those people, then you can stop reading right here.

It’s not “if your hard drive fails”, it’s when your hard drive fails”. And even if the drive does not fail, there are a wide range of things that can wipe out your computer.

These days, there are many external USB hard drives that cost well under \$100, with lots of storage capacity. Using such a drive, and “True Image” software, you can create and store images on the USB drive, and restore everything as it was when you created the image, in a matter of minutes. The software is simple and easy to use. I’ve used it on numerous occasions for systems where, if I had to reinstall everything, both hardware and software, it would have taken me 40-60 hours. And if the data files, images, et al, were not backed up somewhere, they could never be restored.

By creating the image, and storing it on a physically isolated USB hard drive, you have the best protection you can get. And even if you choose not to create an image of your complete drive, this software will “backup” anything/everything you want to preserve.

Don’t be one of those who closes the barn door after the horse is stolen.

CONCLUSION

I hope I’ve given you some ideas how to make your computing activities safer and stronger. Even if all you do is e-mail and the Internet, protecting your computing activities is definitely worthwhile.

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